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# These Transparent Natures are often Deceptive in their Depth: Early American Portrait Miniatures & Women Artists

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“These Transparent Natures are often Deceptive in their Depth.”<sup>1</sup>

## Early American Portrait Miniatures & Women Artists

Cheryl-Lynn May

### Introduction

Mounted in gold locket, dainty brooches, and dangling pendants, miniature portraits stand apart from their full-sized counterparts. Their small size and tender attention to individual details created images that were wrought with significance to their beholder. Holding the visage of a cherished lover or child in one's hands imbued the miniature's form with sentimentality and emotion. The addition of an intricately woven lock of the sitter's hair transformed the tiny portrait into a relic of adoration and love. Not simply meant to be hung on a wall and gazed upon in passing, the miniature portrait was intended from its inception to be worn close to the body, held against the skin, or secreted in a dresser drawer. So potent in their private significance, miniature portraits were literal extensions of the sitters themselves and therefore were cherished objects of personal devotion.

Because of their emotionally charged significance, miniature portraits carried feminine connotations of fragility, delicacy, and sentimentality. The very nature of the form was fragile, being composed of thin sheets of ivory, and the technical execution of portraits rendered in small form required a delicacy of the hand and brush not commonly found in large scale portraits. Moreover, the portrait miniature, being associated with emotion, seemed particularly fitted for feminine expression. Although both men and

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (A Norton Critical Edition), edited by Seymour L. Gross (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967), 182.

women owned and created portrait miniatures in eighteenth and nineteenth century America - the nature and significance of the style found its greatest representation in the hands of women miniaturists. Portrait miniatures seamlessly combined painting and the decorative arts to fulfill individual needs for remembrance and commemoration. The feminine associations of the miniature's form made it possible for late eighteenth and early nineteenth century women miniaturists to become successful, independent artists while at the same time maintaining societal expectations of femininity in conservative, male dominated America.

### **The Development of the Portrait Miniature**

The evolution of the portrait miniature dates back to medieval manuscript illumination. The term miniature comes from the red lead ink used in illuminated manuscripts, *minium*. Illuminated manuscripts embodied the technical skill required to create illustrations in small forms. With their curving vines, detailed foliage, and finely crafted portraits rendered with delicate precision - illuminated manuscripts set the precedent for the skillfully executed, diminutive illustrations we find in the miniature portraits of late eighteenth and nineteenth century America.

Prior to the flourishing of the illuminated manuscripts, Romans idealized themselves on small coins and medals. Although not recognizably miniature portraits as we know them today, the Roman relics represent the potency of human form rendered in a small size. Depicted in profile, these objects captured the likeness of the sitter and provided an accurate mode of documenting easily recognizable features for political and propaganda purposes. During the Italian Renaissance, the use of such classical forms was revived and profile portraits regained popularity amongst the aristocracy. For example, in

1395 Giangaleazzo Visconti commissioned a book of hours by Giovannino dei Grassi (1350 – 1398). Illuminated within the pages of Visconti's *Book of Hours* (fig.1) is a small portrait of the patron in profile - seamlessly combining both the Roman profile portrait style with the artistry of manuscript illumination. In spite of the popularity of miniature profile portraits in Italy, it was in France in the sixteenth century that Jean Clouet (1480 – 1541) established the formal style of portrait miniatures - small painted portraits detached from manuscript pages and placed in oval or circular frames.

Small portraits painted “in littell” were found sporadically across Europe from the fourteenth century onward. It was in England, however, that the miniature style flourished. Portraits rendered in watercolor on vellum became a British specialty in the sixteenth century owing to their popularity with Queen Elizabeth I (1533 – 1603).<sup>2</sup> The Queen's portraits (fig. 2) were executed by Nicolas Hilliard (1547 – 1619) who gained inspiration for his work from the Hans Holbein miniatures in the royal collection. Hilliard's work helped to launch the diversity of the available forms of miniature portraits. Most commonly, portrait miniatures were fastened into locket and adorned with gold chains to be worn close to the body. They were also placed in the lids of jewelry and snuff boxes and attached to pinback settings to be worn on a garment. Additionally, miniatures were also mounted to jeweled settings without fasteners or were merely cased to be tucked into a pocket or slipped in a drawer. Regardless of their final form, miniature portraits were most popular and accessible to the aristocracy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were presented as tokens of loyalty so that the bearer of the image could publicly display their devotion to the royal court. Representing

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<sup>2</sup> Robin Jaffe Frank, *Love and Loss: American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 2.

wealth, status, and political allegiance, the portrait miniature in its earliest inception was both an object of public display and private significance.

Although portrait miniatures embodied the likenesses of elite members of society, the use of the portrait miniature evolved to symbolize far more intimate associations. The likeness of a loved one rendered in miniature captured a tactile and emotional significance that was unsurpassed by large scale portraits. Robin Jaffee Frank explains, “the physical characteristics of miniatures embody their role as substitutes for the beloved.”<sup>3</sup> Worn on the body, portrait miniatures were constant reminders of cherished children, distant lovers, or relatives that had since passed on. Though the person could not be near, the portrait miniature became the stand-in for physical connectedness. In a time when infant mortality rates were high and family members were often swept away by wars or colonial pursuits, having an object of emotional devotion to a loved one became a fitting, if not necessary, personal accessory.

### **Portrait Miniatures in America**

The establishment of colonies in America provided a reason for the increasing popularity of the portrait miniature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and it also was the way in which the form was brought to colonial America. Having been given portraits “in littell” by loved ones back home, British colonists carried these tokens of adoration with them on their long journey across the Atlantic. This single voyage intensified the significance of the portrait miniature to their owners and spurred its popularity in the developing colonies. Miniatures were the colonists’ link to their kin in their home country. Though a vast ocean and many months separated these settlers from

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<sup>3</sup> Frank, *Love and Loss*, 7.

the people they had left behind, their images were forever captured in a form that was easy to transport and wrought with significance by its intimate size.

In spite of the popularity of miniature portraits amongst newly arrived colonists, it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that we see the first miniatures executed in America. Their lack of production until this point was a by-product of the developing colonies. While a large market for prints and imported paintings was driven by the colonial elite, native paintings were scarce. Few trained artists populated the colonies in the early period of migration and the artists that limned paintings were not trained in the art of miniatures. While the colonial aristocracy often sent painting and print commissions abroad during the early phases of colonial development, the nature of the portrait prevented its execution across the Atlantic. To capture the likeness of an individual, a portrait of any size required the sitter to be present with the painter either in bodily form or in the form of a previously executed portrait. As a result, the flourishing of the miniature portrait style required the arrival of a sufficient number of miniatures to provide technical models to native artists as well as enough artists trained in the execution of the portrait miniature in order to firmly establish this detailed form in the American colonies.

The foundation for American portrait miniatures was laid in the 1740s when Mary Roberts (d. 1761) captured a delicate visage in watercolor on a wafer of ivory. Having been raised and trained in England, Roberts' *Woman of the Gibbes or Shoolbred Family* (fig. 3) exists as the first known miniature executed in America in Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>4</sup> Roberts' miniature is housed in a bejeweled, pinback setting with sterling flourishes embellished with ruby colored gems. A woman wearing a lace edged, square

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<sup>4</sup> Frank, *Love and Loss*, 3.

necked gown gazes out at the beholder. Her three quarter pose, the standard representation depicted in portrait miniatures, encompasses the surface of the ivory. There is no background detail; instead we only see dark and light tonalities, a stylistic convention of English miniatures. Roberts' miniature is a testament to the early work of imported artists who set the stage for American born miniaturists in the later period of the eighteenth century.

Because men dominated every sphere of life in this era, it is remarkable that history has handed down to us a woman artist who limned the first the portrait miniature in the American colonies. Yet, Mary Roberts was not alone in her success as a miniaturist. From the budding of the form's execution in the mid-eighteenth century through the height of the form's popularity in the nineteenth century, women found success as artists by exploiting the miniature for their creative pursuits. Although portrait miniatures were limned by men and women alike in colonial American society, it was the women miniaturists who captured the essence of what this form represented. Women in early America were viewed as being emotional, fragile, and sentimental. While these associations severely limited their ability to move beyond the roles of daughter, wife, and mother, it was exactly these associations that made it possible for women to express their creativity using the miniature form. Laura R. Prieto explains, "the portrait miniature seemed a particularly appropriate field for women artists. This was due at least partly to the miniature's intimacy, sentimentality, and diminutive size – attributes identified with femininity."<sup>5</sup> For male miniaturists, the execution of portrait miniatures represented their technical prowess and their skill in capturing the smallest of details in startling accuracy.

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<sup>5</sup> Laura R. Prieto, *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 13.

For female miniaturists, their artistic endeavors were viewed as obvious expressions of their emotional nature.

Regardless of how women miniaturists were seen by society, the fact remains that women and men alike had to be trained in the complicated technical aspects of creating the portrait miniature. The act of painting small images on ivory required additional skills beyond the traditional methods of created portraits on canvas or paper. Water-based paints did not properly adhere to ivory supports until the fats and oils in the material were removed. Artists had to prepare their ivory wafers by heating, greasing, sanding, and finally, treating the surface with gum arabic so that it was fit to receive color.<sup>6</sup> Beyond the necessary skills for preparing ivory wafers for painting, artists had to skillfully control the amount of wash and watercolor applied, as a single drop could ruin an entire composition. Additionally, and most importantly, artists had to create their portraits in a manner far different from large scale painting using stippling, hatching, and washing.<sup>7</sup> Men were able to acquire these skills by studying abroad or collaborating with other male artists. In contrast, many early women miniaturists were forced to acquire their skills through the careful study of technical manuals. Working independently with little assistance from other artists, the success of early women miniaturists stands as a testament to their ingenuity, dedication, and creativity with the miniature's form.

The level of technical skills required to create miniatures did not stand in the way of women exploiting the form to become successful artists. However, it was not simply the form itself that allowed women to gain their independence through the creation of

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<sup>6</sup>Carol Aiken in Jo Ann Ridley, *Looking for Eulabee Dix: The Illustrated Biography of an American Miniaturist* (Washington, D.C.: The National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1997), 286 – 287.

<sup>7</sup> Stippling is the application of paint with the tip of the brush. Hatching is the application of paints in small dashes. Washing is the application of flowing wet colors over a surface using a loaded brush. From Aiken, *Looking for Eulabee*, 289.



miniature portraits. The pervasive social conservatism in early America also made it acceptable for women to pick up a paintbrush. Owing to colonial society's Puritan foundations, early American art was far less risqué than its European counterparts. Traditionally, early artists did not execute images of the human body in the nude nor was there great emphasis placed on studying the nude form. To be sure, Prieto explains that "American audiences retained a deep skepticism concerning the propriety of either men or women artists' representing the body in the manner of 'decadent' European art."<sup>8</sup> American art of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a reflection of the country's conservative sensibilities.

As a result of the country's social conservatism, American women found themselves in a more flexible position of acceptance in the creation of art. As Prieto explains, "demands for moral purity thus made art more generally acceptable as a respectable female vocation."<sup>9</sup> The arts were not simply something the occasional woman decided to dabble in. On the contrary, women in the middle and upper classes were greatly encouraged to pursue their artistic talents. Beginning with the early years of their schooling, young girls were taught the skills of needlework, lacemaking, embroidery, and china painting. It was assumed that "in order for women to fulfill their 'proper' roles in society," according to Prieto, "they needed to develop a certain degree of artistic accomplishment that would enable them to build and maintain beautiful, cultivated homes."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it was not seen as out of the ordinary for women to express their creative talents - as long as those talents maintained the boundaries of proper decorum for the 'well-bred' American woman. This rule applied to all classes of women. Regardless

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<sup>8</sup>Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 22.

of social standing, it was presumed that good wives and mothers would have the ability to creatively nurture their home and family using their domestic skills.

### **Mary Way**

Although it was deemed acceptable for women to pursue their artistic talents for the betterment of their home and family, there was a distinct line between the domestic arts and the professional pursuit of arts. The first American woman to successfully transition from the domestic sphere to the professional sphere was the groundbreaking miniaturist Mary Way (1769 – 1833). In every regard, Way’s work stands as a testament to the ingenuity of early American women to defy gendered boundaries while maintaining the necessary decorum to be socially accepted, respected, *and* self-sufficient. Born in 1769 to a New London, Connecticut family, Way’s beginnings must have been humble. Her father, Ebenezer, was a store-keeper and her mother, Mary Taber, died not long after her younger sister was born.<sup>11</sup> Way never married and, because of her modest background, had to find a way to support herself and her family. Having been properly educated as a young girl in the arts of the needle and brush, Way utilized her talents and the opportunities made possible to women by the miniature’s form to establish an artistic niche for herself in the New London community and ultimately in New York City.

Way’s miniatures are unlike anything that came before or after her. Known as “dressed miniatures,” these small portraits utilized Way’s talents in the domestic arts (sewing and lacemaking) and the fine arts (painting) to remarkably capture the three dimensional likeness of the sitter. According to William Lamson Warren, “no other miniaturist in this country is known to have created such clever and engaging

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<sup>11</sup> Ramsay Macmullen, *Sisters of the Brush: Their Family, Art, Life, and Letters 1797 – 1833* (New Haven, Conn.: PastTimes Press, 1997), 17.

depictions.”<sup>12</sup> Way captured the visage of her sitters in profile, cutting out the silhouette of the face in paper and adding details using delicate strokes of watercolor. To this foundation she affixed clothing composed of silks, linens, and other fabrics that were stitched and glued to the miniature’s surface. To create a more realistic representation of her sitter, Way would then add highlights and further details to her illustrations in watercolor, creating what truly was a tactile and three dimensional representation of her client. This early work prepared Way for a successful career as a miniaturist working in watercolor on ivory and mixed media on paper or fabric ground.

As early as age eighteen, Way was already well-versed in her unique form of miniatures. Executed between 1787 and 1788, *Polly (or Molly) Carew* (fig. 4) depicts the young girl at age fifteen or sixteen.<sup>13</sup> *Polly* is composed of silk, linen, and sheer cotton. Way captured the deep pleats of the girl’s skirt, the elevation of her bustle, the three dimensional twist of the bow at her back, and the scalloped shawl collar resting on her shoulders. Her hands, cut from paper and painted to mimic flesh, are represented with absolute precision; the thumb is extended upward while the remaining fingers relax and curve inward. Her posture is exquisitely stiff and recalls the fashion plates of the era depicting straight backed, corseted women. The face in *Polly (or Molly) Carew* is remarkable for such an early example of Way’s work – the curve of the nose, the tightness of the lips, and the focused gaze of the sitter are rendered with soft shadows along the line of the chin, just below the eyelid, and around the flare of her nostril. The sitter’s hair is worked with exacting detail and close examination reveals the definition of each single strand. Overall, while capturing the details of the sitter’s appearance, Way’s

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<sup>12</sup> William Lamson Warren, “Mary Way’s Dressed Miniatures,” *The Magazine Antiques*, October 1992: 544.

<sup>13</sup> Warren, “Mary Way,” 547.

early style was marked by an overt tendency to add curvature to the details – the eyes, nose, chin, jaw line, and even the hair exhibits a circular dimensionality that detracts from the total effect of naturalism. Regardless, the result of *Polly (or Molly) Carew* is a remarkably three-dimensional image that is reminiscent of paper dolls and French fashion plates.

As her earliest known work, *Polly (or Molly) Carew* represents Way's starting point in the creation of miniatures. With the passage of time, the artist abandoned her early tendency to elaborate on curves in favor of a more naturalistic, sharp, and accurate rendering of the human image. By 1800 we see a noticeable shift in her representations. With its intricate details to the hair, eyes, shadows on the face, and even the lashes, Way's *Charles Holt* (fig. 5) from 1800 marks the transition of her style. Holt was the artist's cousin and the publisher of the New London, Connecticut *Bee*.<sup>14</sup> This proved to be advantageous for Way who had Holt publish advertisements for her availability to do portraits, portrait miniatures, paintings on glass, landscapes, and "views of country seats."<sup>15</sup> Holt's portrait miniature measures just 2 ½ by 2 inches yet its detail is striking. Dressed in military attire, Holt wears a *chapeau bras* that is composed of black felt. Attached to the felt is a silk ribbon rosette that has been sewn to the shaped front.<sup>16</sup> Unlike *Polly (or Molly) Carew* (fig. 4), Holt's miniature is only partially "dressed." Whereas *Polly* is equally composed of paper and fabrics, the only fabrics used by Way in *Charles Holt* are the felt and silk ribbon that articulates the *chapeau bras*. Way painted in the sitter's blue coat, brass buttons, white stock, and waistcoat instead of using fabrics highlighted with watercolors. The visage captured in this miniature is dramatic with its

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<sup>14</sup> Warren, "Mary Way," 544.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

use of swarthy shadowing around the upper lip and chin, the prominent rendering of the nose and heavy brow, and the sharp details of the eyes, eyelashes, and folds of the clothing.

While *Charles Holt* represents a shift in Way's representations, its minimal use of "dressing" was not standard for Way's dressed miniatures. During the same year as *Charles Holt* was executed, Way created a portrait of an unnamed *Gentleman* (fig. 6). Harkening back to her earliest work, *Gentleman* is fully dressed with the tactile features of the costume and face rendered in vibrant three-dimensionality. Way assembled this miniature portrait from a cutout paper silhouette pasted to a black fabric backing. To this she painted in the details of the face using watercolor. To create the torso of the sitter, Way stitched and painted fabric to create a shell-colored waistcoat and a dark overcoat with faux silver buttons attached to the surface.<sup>17</sup> The sitter's hair is magnificently worked in grey watercolors with fine touches of white to mimic the hair powder that was in fashion during the period. Although from the same year as *Charles Holt*, Way's *Gentleman* has a decidedly different feel to it with its three-dimensionality and attention to surface details. *Gentleman* demonstrates Way's talents as an artist to transcend stylistic boundaries to create varied and individual representations of her sitters using her unique design.

Way's dressed miniatures are startlingly original when compared to the mainstream miniatures being produced during the late 1700s and early 1800s. Although Way is one of the earliest known women miniaturists, men like John Singleton Copley, William Dunlap, Charles Willson Peale, and Benjamin West were well-established contemporaries in the art of miniature portraits, landscapes, history scenes, and full-scale

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<sup>17</sup> Frank, *Love and Loss*, 199 – 200.

portraiture. Male artists were extremely active in the creation of miniature portraits during this time. In comparing Way's dressed miniatures to the work of her male contemporaries, we see a significant departure by Way from the traditionally accepted form of portrait miniatures. For example, Dunlap's *Self Portrait* (fig. 7) from 1805 shows the artist dressed in similar attire to Way's *Gentleman* (fig. 6). Dunlap's portrait is rendered entirely in watercolor on ivory and, similar to Way's miniature, is shown in a nearly profile facial pose. The figures in both Dunlap's and Way's miniatures wear overcoats with brass buttons and waistcoats with a high collar. The visage in Dunlap's miniature is more articulated, with greater emphasis placed on capturing the tonalities of the flesh and the flush of the cheeks. The hair in *Self Portrait* is naturalistic and captures the effect of being tossed about by the wind whereas Way's *Gentleman* wears a very rigid hairstyle. Both figures reside in undefined space however Dunlap's composition is more open due to the gradations of light and dark. Way's background, in contrast, is much more closed due to the uniform coloration of the black fabric background.

Although Way's dressed miniatures accomplish a less naturalistic representation of the human form than her contemporary's work, one should not be fooled by the stylistic differences inherent in the media Way utilized. As an artist, Way was multifaceted and multitalented. Her apparent preference for dressed miniatures (based on the number of known dressed miniatures) naturally limited the type of work she could execute but this did not mean that she was incapable of producing anything else. There is a stark difference between what is possible using paper and fabric or ivory and watercolor: Way could do both.

Demonstrating her talents, independent spirit, and ingenuity, Way moved to New York from New London sometime around 1810. In 1820 she created a pair of framed ivory miniatures that rivaled the sophistication of her tutored contemporaries.<sup>18</sup> Entitled *Mrs. Charles Briggs (Eliza Bassal Meiller) and Charles Briggs* (figs. 8,9), this pair of portrait miniatures is set into individual walnut frames. Way created the pair using the circular format that was not common for the period.<sup>19</sup> The artist strayed from convention in the formal execution of the *Briggs* pairing in more ways than just the frame alone. Like her dressed miniatures, Way painted the sitters in profile. Both images have a breathtaking, flesh-like realism to their appearances. Way's experiences in New York clearly provided her with the exposure necessary for the formal execution of miniatures on ivory. In the *Briggs* pairing, Way flawlessly allows the translucency of the ivory to represent the flesh of the face. Slight touches of color accent the shading of the jaw line, the volume of the chin, and the depth of the eyes. As in her dressed miniatures, Way carefully executed the hair however rather than creating static locks, she imbued Eliza and Charles with lifelike styling. The curves of Eliza's curls accurately separate to reveal the flesh tone of the woman's forehead. In *Charles Briggs*, Way captures the lifelike, windblown locks seen in Dunlap's *Self-Portrait* (fig. 7). Both of her backgrounds remain unembellished however Way took full advantage of the luminosity of the ivory and applied gradations of light and dark colors to suggest a sense of depth to the miniature. Way painted the pair to face one another, perhaps in an everlasting testament to their bond as husband and wife or mother and father. The final result of both compositions

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Way's portrait miniatures have only recently been identified after a collector discovered one of her portrait miniatures bearing her signature on the reverse. With a firmly documented miniature in place, scholars are now able to firmly attribute previously unidentified miniatures to her oeuvre.

<sup>19</sup> Portrait miniatures were traditionally cased or framed in oval or square housings.

placed side by side is a remarkably open and naturalistic pairing that accurately captures the luminosity and depth possible with watercolor and ivory.

The stylistic changes we see in Way's miniatures are due to her move to New York from New London. Needing to be financially independent, Way made this transition in order to garner the business that her small community could not provide. In New York, surrounded by a thriving urban arts community, she met other artists and encountered works that were not possible to see in her hometown. Way captured her experience in New York in a series of letters written to friends and family.<sup>20</sup> In these letters, Way illustrates that although her experience was trying and difficult, she was able to find success as a woman miniaturist working in a male dominated society. Upon her arrival to New York, Way writes that she was faced with a barrage of "painters, engravers, critics and connoisseurs...who flock'd in from quarters to spy out my liberties and judge of my pretensions, examin my works, question me respecting the course of my studies and mode of practice, to approve and to condemn."<sup>21</sup> Even though she faced an onslaught of curious critics, she was embraced by the male dominated artistic community – thereby illustrating that women working with the miniature's form were deemed acceptable. William Joseph Williams (1759 – 1823), a miniaturist, "had the goodness," according to Way, "to assist [her] studies, furnish [her] with books, and give [her] instruction, by which [she] so well profited."<sup>22</sup> Other male artists openly embraced the independent Mary Way who established a school to teach painting, lacemaking, and other

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<sup>20</sup> Way's correspondence to the Way and Chaplain family have been compiled in Ramsay Macmullen's *Sisters of the Brush: Their Family, Art, Life, and Letters 1797 – 1833* (New Haven, Conn.: PastTimes Press, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Macmullen, *Sisters*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Macmullen, *Sisters*, 26.



arts, while managing to support herself and ultimately handing down her skills and talents to her niece, Eliza.

Though she found assistance from the male dominated circle of artists in New York, Way's story is truly that of a self-made woman artist in early America. It is because of her ingenuity and creativity that she was able to establish herself and express her own unique style using the form of the portrait miniature. As a professional woman artist, Way successfully broke down the social boundaries between women's arts of the domestic sphere and the arts of the professional sphere. Not coming from a family of artists, Way acquired the necessary skills of a miniaturist through her perseverance and dedication to her art. Mary Way understood that as a woman "much may be learnt by study, observation, and practice, without the aid of a teacher."<sup>23</sup> Her experience illustrates that the feminine associations of the miniature's form made it possible for women to become independently successful and accepted artists at the turn of the eighteenth century.

### **Sarah Goodridge**

Mary Way was not alone in her experience as a self-made, self-taught woman artist. Following in her footsteps, Sarah Goodridge (1788 – 1853) "reigned among the leading miniaturists in Boston between 1820 and 1840."<sup>24</sup> Born in 1788 in Templeton, Massachusetts, Goodridge's father, Ebenezer, was a farmer and mechanic. Like Way, Goodridge rose up from humble beginnings and exploited the "few opportunities available to study drawing."<sup>25</sup> Having never married, Goodridge crossed the line from the

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<sup>23</sup> Macmullen, *Sisters*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Julie Aronson & Marjorie Wiesman, *Perfect Likeness: European and American Portrait Miniatures from the Cincinnati Art Museum* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), 196.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

domestic arts to the professional arts to support herself and her family. Although she began her professional career producing likenesses in chalk and watercolor on paper, she found her success with the portrait miniature. Having not been educated in anything beyond producing likenesses on paper, Goodridge was “extremely desirous to learn the method by which [portrait miniatures] were executed.”<sup>26</sup> In 1819, after seeing a miniature of Napoleon by Duchesne, a French artist, Goodridge sought out the assistance of Gilbert Stuart (1755 – 1828) to assist her in mastering the art of miniature painting. Stuart was well-versed in the technical execution of miniatures and his “direction markedly improved her work.”<sup>27</sup> Just one year after receiving instruction from Stuart, Goodridge’s work had acquired such acclaim that she was able to open a personal studio in Boston.<sup>28</sup>

In 1820 when Goodridge opened her Boston studio, she painted one of many self-portraits she would execute throughout her lifetime. In Goodridge’s *Self-Portrait* (1820) (fig. 10), we see her seamlessly combining her technical skills with an emotional handling of her figure to create a sensitive representation. The artist wraps herself in a deep burgundy shawl that provides a stark contrast to the lightness of her dress and skin. This shawl, a hallmark of the artist’s portraits,<sup>29</sup> speaks to Goodridge’s independent spirit. Although her self-portrait follows the social decorum expected of women at the turn of the nineteenth century, the burst of deep, pulsing red onto an otherwise cool palette hints at the spirit captured in the miniature. The light source enters the composition from behind Goodridge’s shoulder, casting her face in shadows. She does not gaze directly out at the viewer, but instead bears a focused expression and looks out

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Aronson, *Perfect Likeness*, 198.

slightly towards the left.<sup>30</sup> The composition in Goodridge's *Self-Portrait* is open, with a considerable amount of negative space surrounding the figure. Her *Self-Portrait*, already quite small in size,<sup>31</sup> depicts Goodridge being overwhelmed by the foggy atmosphere that surrounds her. Her hand is barely seen clutching her burgundy shawl as she attempts to envelope herself with the material. In creating this portrait, Goodridge captured something of the essence she grasped in each of her portrait miniatures. This self-portrait reveals the image of a woman embarking on a new chapter of her life, placed under the critical eye of the public, and entirely reliant on that same public for her survival. Determined but not entirely assured, Goodridge contemplates what lays ahead for her and articulates her insecurities in *Self-Portrait* (1820).

In 1825, Goodridge completed another self-portrait, this time with a decidedly different feel than her *Self-Portrait* from 1820. In *Self-Portrait* (1825) (fig. 11) Goodridge's visage abruptly confronts the viewer – her gaze is penetrating. Swathed in her burgundy shawl, Goodridge is poised and self-assured. She prominently poises herself parallel to the picture plane. We see no hint of a garment beneath her shawl and her bare arms and neck providing a stunning contrast to the quality of the fabric. The artist's hair is piled atop her head following the fashions of the time and her delicately rendered ringlets naturalistically rest atop her forehead. As with *Self-Portrait* (1820) (fig. 10), Goodridge leaves the background smoky and undefined however, in contrast to her earlier self-portrait, the overall composition is quite closed. Whereas Goodridge once saw herself diminutively housed within the miniature's confines, just five years later she reveals a woman who confidently consumes the picture plane. The viewer's gaze is not

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<sup>30</sup> Aronson, *Perfect Likeness*, 197.

<sup>31</sup> Goodridge's *Self-Portrait* ca. 1820 measures 2 ½ x 1 7/8 in.

drawn to the background – instead, they are engulfed by the serene, self-assured stare that penetrates the confines of the composition. In spite of the bold coloration of the shawl, it is the eyes that draw the viewer into this image. Here, Sarah Goodridge captures herself as a woman in transition and embracing her success.

Goodridge captured her visage again in 1830 and 1835. In both images we see the full evolution of this independent spirit. *Self-Portrait* (1830) (fig. 12) is a departure from her earlier self-portraits. Here Goodridge represents herself from the side, twisting her gaze towards the viewer. Her hair is voluminous and her signature shawl cascades off her shoulders, elegantly revealing a richly detailed, lace trimmed gown bedecked with ruching from the shoulder seam and across the bodice. Goodridge illuminates the background with a light source that enters the image from the right side, creating the sense of another space just beyond the picture plane. Whereas Goodridge's earlier self-portraits illustrate the artist fully seated, *Self-Portrait* (1830) seems to capture a woman in motion – it is as if she has been caught mid-stride and is purposefully gazing out at her interrupter. After ten years of working in her own studio, Goodridge clearly represents herself as a woman who is comfortable and proud of her success as an independent artist.

*Self-Portrait* (1835) (fig. 13) is Goodridge's most compelling illustration of her visage. Between 1820 and 1830, we witnessed the evolution of a diminutive woman flowering into a strong, independent spirit. By 1835, at the height of her career as a miniaturist, Goodridge captures herself in the midst of her work. She completely disregards the viewer and focuses intently on the composition perched before her. Her intent gaze speaks to intensity of concentration required to execute fine details in small size. A crystal tumbler of water stands beside Goodridge's work table, yet unfettered by

the cloudy swirls of watercolor. Unlike her other self-portraits, *Self-Portrait* (1835) shows Goodridge fully clothed – even her neck is modestly hidden from view by a twisted kerchief. The wide shoulders of her gown and the slanting curve of her garment’s form create a sense of weight pressing down on Goodridge’s figure yet nothing prevents her from continuing her work. Unlike all of her previous self-portraits, Goodridge absorbs the picture plane entirely – the background space is merely light and shadows with the true focus being on the carefully rendered details of her gown, her intense gaze, and the curiosity of catching a glimpse of the work she is executing.

Sarah Goodridge’s miniatures encouraged individual contemplation of the subject. Her handling of light, color, and details captured intangible emotion. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in a self-portrait executed by Goodridge in 1828 entitled *Beauty Revealed (Self-Portrait)* (fig. 14). In this horizontally oriented image we see a luminous bosom swathed in fine white fabric. This image of “vibrant sensuality”<sup>32</sup> was limned for statesman Daniel Webster (1782 – 1852). In what can be interpreted only as a token of passionate adoration, Goodridge’s *Beauty Revealed* is more than a tactile rendering of sexual desire. Here we see Goodridge completely exposed and taking full advantage of the personal and private associations of the portrait miniature. Perhaps somewhere within herself Goodridge was aware of the longevity of her work and purposefully eliminated her visage from the composition. She did not simply create a set of disembodied breasts for her beloved, whom she painted at least twelve times over the span of two decades.<sup>33</sup> Close examination, as one would intimately gaze upon their beloved, reveals a small beauty mark just to the left of the center of her chest. To the

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<sup>32</sup> Frank, *Love and Loss*, 262.

<sup>33</sup> Frank, *Love and Loss*, 263.

person who knew Goodridge intimately, this would have been an obvious and tender identifier. *Beauty Revealed* was painted when Goodridge was 40 years old and we can only assume that she was somewhat forgiving in the representation of her breasts with their perfect symmetry and exacting curvature. Regardless, this is how Goodridge viewed her sensuality and her femininity and for that, this image is incredibly powerful. *Beauty Revealed* captures more than physical desire and love; it also is a remarkable testament to Goodridge's skill as a miniaturist and the independence the form allowed her as a woman artist. Note the way Goodridge creates a composition that nearly fills the ivory with sheer luminosity and transparency. Her ability to carefully apply color to this finicky medium and create a three-dimensional, naturalistic and lustrous composition reveals her talent and skill as a miniaturist.

Goodridge's work was not limited to self-portraits and her oeuvre captures a remarkable quantity of visages. In 1823 Goodridge composed *A Lady* (fig. 15) and in doing so, demonstrated her ability to capture her sitter's likeness with honest and sensitive detail. Fulfilling the nineteenth century desire for realistic portraits,<sup>34</sup> *A Lady* illustrates a woman with upswept hair gazing out and away from the viewer. She wears a sapphire blue gown that is accented with rouleaux trimming, forming a zigzag pattern along the curve of her body. The ruffled collar of the dress is asymmetrical and tenderly exposes the sitter's décolleté. The slightest hint of a dramatic burgundy shawl, as seen in Goodridge's self-portraits, can be seen gliding over her right arm. The rich combination of lush blue and deep burgundy contrasted by ivory flesh tones and a stark white, crisp color creates a polychromatic composition with an abundance of visual interest. The viewer is drawn in by the gaze of the sitter to examine the curl of her hair, the slope of

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<sup>34</sup> Aronson, *Perfect Likeness*, 198.

her brow, and the tactile quality of her garment. *A Lady* is representative of the individuality Goodridge captured in her portraits. Such attention to detail and contrasts of color hints at the spirit of the sitter while at the same time, urging the eye to fully study the portrait. In an almost meditative quality, Goodridge's miniatures embody the significance of the form as an object of intense personal devotion. Her portrait miniatures encourage the viewer to reflect on the sitter's gaze, the hints of color, and the luscious details. For the beloved of the woman captured in *A Lady*, Goodridge's portrait miniature would have provided limitless opportunities for doting, cherishing, and recalling memory and emotion. *A Lady* represents the way Goodridge excelled in capturing the physical likeness of her sitter while at the same time, rendering an image that represents a hint of the sitter's character.

The portrait miniature served many purposes for Goodridge. It allowed her to be self-sufficient, to express her creative insights into her personal evolution as a woman and an artist, and to capture the sensitive likenesses of her sitter. Goodridge excelled at transforming the transparency of ivory into luminous, detailed compositions. Because society accepted women producing miniatures, it became possible for Goodridge to exploit the form as an object of personal expression and creativity. With her intricate compositions and emotional handling of her subject, Goodridge's work reveals the varied representations made possible by the miniature's form and its emotional associations.

## **Conclusion**

From the establishment of the portrait miniature's form in early America by the English-born artist Mary Roberts to the stunning revelations crafted by the native born artist Sarah Goodridge – the portrait miniature's form carried with it strong associations

of early American femininity. Its small size, intricate details, and emotional symbolism naturally connected it to women but it was the dynamic ingenuity of early women artists that allowed this form to flourish in America's feminine hands. Eighteenth and early nineteenth century American conservatism helped pave the way for women to seize the portrait miniature to create self-sufficient lives for themselves at a time when women had few options. Mary Way's dressed miniatures laid the foundation for native born women to utilize the miniature's form as a means of gaining their financial independence. Her seamless fusion of the "feminine" decorative arts with the formal execution of traditional miniatures stands as a testament to her creativity and desire to succeed. Following in her footsteps, Sarah Goodridge seized the portrait miniature in an intensely personal way – documenting her own transformation as a woman *and* artist in multiple self-portraits while at the same time, enhancing the form's intimate associations and capturing the character and likeness of her sitters. Her innovative use of the portrait miniature and re-imagining of its depictions illustrate the dynamism women miniaturists brought to their work.

Mary Way and Sarah Goodridge reveal the richness of eighteenth and nineteenth century American art, the originality of women artists, and the often under recognized possibilities that were available to women who were able to carefully navigate the restrictive requirements of feminine decorum. Their stories reveal that, although difficult, it was possible for women who were not formally trained artists to become self-sufficient through the use of the miniature's form, regardless of their social standing. Sadly, in spite of their accomplishments, you will not find Mary Way or Sarah Goodridge discussed in survey texts of American art, nor will you find them illustrated in compilations of women



artists. There are no scholarly monographs devoted to their output and art historians have yet to compile their catalogue raisonnés. Portrait miniature historiography reveals a great number of American women miniaturists, each with their own unique tale to tell of how the miniature's form made it possible for them to succeed in a strictly male dominated society. The work of Way and Goodridge speaks to the immense possibilities of further study into the lives of American women artists. The miniature portrait's "transparent natures are often deceptive in their depth,"<sup>35</sup> and their power to stir emotions, connect us to the past, and move the heart cannot be underestimated.

## Illustrations

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<sup>35</sup> From Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, 182. In this text, Hawthorne weaves one woman's meditations over the portrait miniature of her brother. Hepzibah lingers over Clifford's portrait miniature for comfort as she struggles with his aged condition as an ex-convict recently released from prison. In the excerpt with this quote, Hepzibah's niece Phoebe is observed by Holgrave, the houseguest and daguerreotypist, who "fancied that he could look through Phoebe...but these transparent natures are often deceptive in their depth; those pebbles at the bottom of the fountain are further from us than we think."



Fig. 1. Giovannino dei Grassi, Psalm 118:81 from the *Libro d'Ore Visconti* (*Visconti Book of Hours*), 1395, commissioned by Giangaleazzo Visconti, Banco Rari, Biblioteca Nazionale, 397, fol. 115, Florence.



Fig. 2. Nicholas Hilliard, *Queen Elizabeth I*, 1595 – 1600, Courtesy of Christies Auction House.



Fig. 3. Mary Roberts, *Woman of the Gibbes or Shoolbred Family*, 1740 – 1750, Carolina Art Association, Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, S.C.



Fig. 4. Mary Way, *Polly (or Molly) Carew*, 1787 – 1788, Collection of William Lamson Warren.



Fig. 5. Mary Way, *Charles Holt*, 1800, Courtesy of I.E. Lieverant.



Fig. 6. Mary Way, *Gentleman*, 1800, Yale University Art Collection.



Fig. 7. William Dunlap, *Self-Portrait*, 1805, Yale University Art Collection.

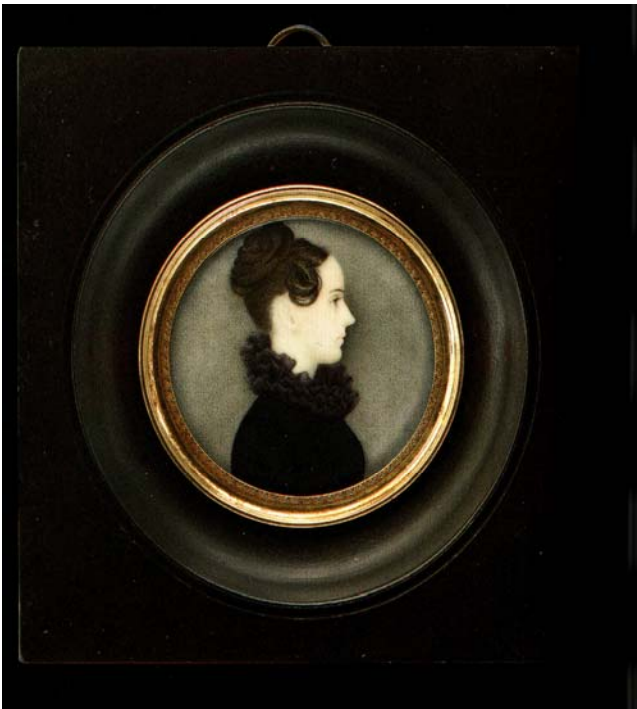


Fig. 8. Mary Way, *Mrs. Charles Briggs (Eliza Bassal Meiller)*, 1820, Yale University Art Collection.



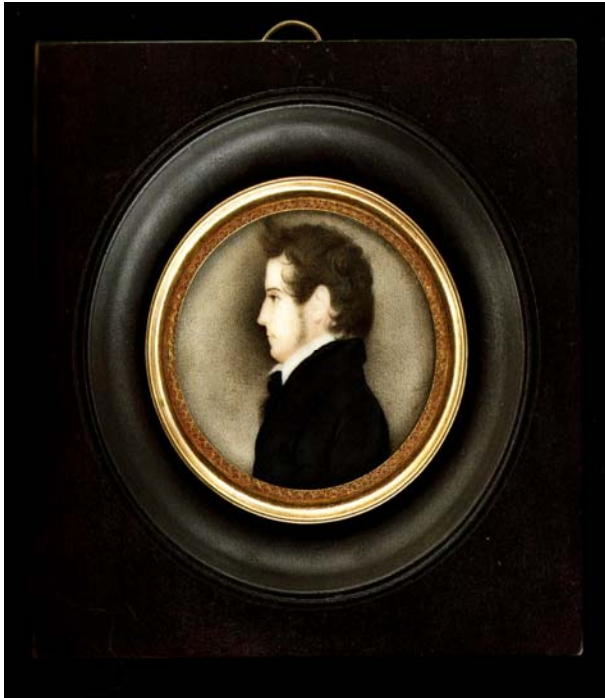


Fig. 9. Mary Way, *Charles Briggs*, 1820, Yale University Art Collection.



Fig. 10. Sarah Goodridge, *Self-Portrait*, 1820, Cincinnati Art Museum.



Fig. 11. Sarah Goodridge, *Self-Portrait*, 1825, Smithsonian Art Museum.



Fig. 12. Sarah Goodridge, *Self-Portrait*, 1830, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 13. Sarah Goodridge, *Self-Portrait*, 1835, Courtesy of the R.W. Norton Gallery, Shreveport, La.

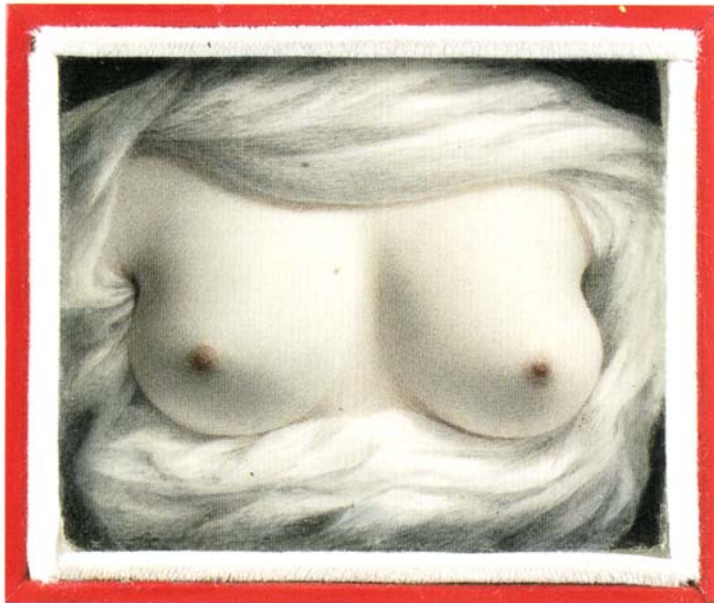


Fig. 14. Sarah Goodridge, *Beauty Revealed (Self-Portrait)*, 1828, Gloria Manney Collection.





Fig. 15. Sarah Goodridge, *A Lady*, 1823, Cincinnati Art Museum.

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